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Intercultural communicative competence in Foreign Language Education - questions of theory, practice and research

Introduction

Language teaching and learning has undergone a ‘cultural turn’ since the emergence of ‘the Communicative Approach’ and ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ in the 1970s. The earlier study of language, which involved the study of literary and other texts, had neglected the need for ‘communicative competence’— the ability to use language in socially appropriate ways, often operationalised as ‘politeness’. However, perhaps as a consequence of globalisation, new technologies, and mass economic and refugee migration, it has become clear that communicative language teaching too, with its focus on sociolinguistic appropriateness and politeness, is inadequate to the task of teaching for communication. This new social context requires consideration of the ways in which people of different languages — including language learners themselves — think and act, and how this might impact on successful communication and interaction. The ‘cultural turn’ – the introduction of ‘intercultural competence’ to complement ‘communicative competence’ – has further refined the notion of what it is to be competent for communication with speakers of different languages. Teachers and learners now need to be ‘aware’ of other people’s ‘cultures’ as well as their own, and therefore, the term ‘intercultural (communicative) competence’ has emerged, along with other terms such as ‘cultural awareness’ and ‘transnational competence’.

Despite this ‘cultural turn’, for many teachers, learners and the general public, the purposes of language teaching remain the same and appear to be self-evident: to develop the ability to communicate. However, in addition, some language teachers have also recognised the opportunity to re-integrate the aims of the liberal educational philosophy which had been attached to language teaching in the 19th century, i.e. the personal development of the individual through empathetic understanding of other countries, peoples and their languages, characterised by Humboldt’s notion of *Bildung*.

The ‘cultural turn’ is most evident in a substantial number of theoretical writings, often published in handbooks (e.g., Deardorff, 2009; Jackson, 2011; Straub et al., 2007). There are far fewer publications about classroom practice which many readers of this journal will regret. The relationship between theory and practice in education is a difficult one. ‘Practitioners’ often feel that ‘theorists’ are too distant from classrooms, but ‘theorists’ would say that all practice embodies theory even if it is not acknowledged. This applies as much to second/foreign language teaching as to the teaching of other subjects, and the emergence of any new approach, new method, new purpose, brings the latent problems into view. The ‘cultural turn’ in foreign language education is no exception. The appearance in curriculum documents of references to ‘culture’, ‘intercultural competence’, ‘intercultural understanding’ and other such phrases, suggests that the ‘theorists’ have persuaded curriculum designers of

the significance of these concepts but, as Peiser and Jones show in this volume, the relationship with the priorities and interests of learners (and teachers) is tenuous.

However, rather than pursuing the origins and impact of this much repeated theory/practice dichotomy, it is better to reflect on the dichotomy itself. Rather than a contrast between two perspectives, there are in fact three elements of foreign language education to consider: classroom practice, theoretical models and empirical investigations, all of which are interrelated.

Descriptions of classroom practice are always helpful for teachers, who are usually confined to their own classrooms and have little opportunity to observe and gather impressions and inspiration from others. Descriptions which make the underlying principles explicit, which formulate the professional intuitions with which many teachers plan and implement their teaching, are particularly useful because they provide a better basis for transfer to other situations. Ultimately, any change which is inspired by others needs to be systematic, and it is here that theoretical models have a practical function.

Models are abstractions from the detail of experience lived by teachers and learners. Models guide practitioners by suggesting what ought to be done to achieve specified ends, and how it can be done to ensure that learners learn. Models need to be constantly reviewed in the light of [developments in](#) practice and this is the place for the third element, empirical investigation. For it is empirical investigation which provides the grounds for reasoned critique of practice and attempts to model it, leading to improved models and practice in a virtuous circle.

The first four articles in this collection demonstrate this interrelationship among practice, model and investigation. By showing how two models need to be combined to complement each other, Borghetti focuses on the task of model construction to represent the complexity of practice and how it *should* be conceived. Models for practice are both descriptive and prescriptive. This combined model will need to be tested against further practice and empirical investigation. Méndez Garcia also brings together two models (CLIL and ICC). In her case they are combined already in practice in Andalusia, Spain, and this affords the opportunity to introduce the third element, empirical investigation, to analyse how the practice developed from these models is perceived by teachers in their classrooms.

Porto and Yang and Fleming also draw upon existing models in their empirical investigations, with the emphasis on analysing learners' learning processes and their ability to comprehend phenomena from another language-and-culture or 'linguaculture'. In both cases, there are implications for practice and, as Yang and Fleming make clear, there is the further question of transferability of models and practice to other contexts.

These first four articles thus illustrate the importance of replacing the theory/practice dichotomy with a more subtle and accurate perspective on practice, model and investigation.

The writers of the next four articles, while drawing on models, also challenge them and in doing so introduce new factors which need to be taken into the cultural turn. These

developments also suggest the need for further exploration in classroom practice and learner outcomes.

Houghton and Ros i Solé in their articles, place emphasis on confronting and challenging models with the data from empirical investigations. In doing so they propose new concepts; Houghton has an Intercultural Dialogue Model and Ros i Solé replaces the concept of the Intercultural Speaker with the Cosmopolitan Speaker. These in turn will need to be confronted with further investigations, but in the meantime, they can be fruitfully used to guide practice and ensure it is systematic.

Houghton and Ros i Solé both introduce another theme in recent developments in foreign language education. As in many other domains of contemporary life, the question of 'identity' is significant for both of them in their approach to language teaching with an educational as well as functional focus. Houghton is concerned to foster identity development. Communication skills doubtless improve as a corollary, and there is scope for further empirical investigation here. Ros i Solé argues that new environmental conditions – 'banal cosmopolitanism' – have created new identities in learners, as indicated by empirical investigation, and this necessitates modification of the existing model of the Intercultural Speaker.

Peiser and Jones are also concerned with learners and their perceptions of the concept or model of 'Intercultural Understanding' introduced into the curriculum documents which govern their classroom realities. Like Ros i Solé, they too argue that the environment is a crucial factor. Environmental factors help to explain learners' perceptions of how the curriculum model is being introduced into their classroom lives. Peiser and Jones differ from Ros i Solé and Houghton with their focus on identity by suggesting a model with complex characteristics (LSCI - Language learning, School environment, Community, and International world), based on and a refinement of Barrett's SSCM model (of societal, social, cognitive and motivational factors). Thus, in their work Peiser and Jones pursue the interrelationships between models and investigations.

Zotzmann and Hernández Zamora also deal with the concept of identity, which has tended to dominate contemporary theory, and – with a similar holistic perspective to Peiser and Jones – argue that this dominance is regrettable. They argue that the 'politics of recognition' with 'identity' at its centre, the identity of individuals and groups, has obscured the importance of the 'politics of redistribution' – with the concept of social class at its centre. The former can be seen as a consequence of the 'cultural turn' in foreign language teaching and, they argue, has had an undesirable effect on the interests of foreign language educationists. Instead, they argue for a renewed focus on critical realism, and the analysis of power, in approaches to language-and-culture. The role of education in the pursuit of social justice should be based on a combination of the interest in identities, individuals and discourses together with the politics of redistribution. In doing so they remind us of the significance of all types of education in the wider political environment in which we live as teachers, theorists and investigators.

Together, these eight articles emphasise the important interrelationship among models (as guidance for teacher practice), practice (the relationship between what teachers do, and how, where, and what learners learn), and empirical investigation through teacher-led research (examples of best practices informed by or resulting in good models). The strength of these research-led articles derives from their grounding in practice. As such, they foreshadow the need for and importance of teacher-led research on the cultural turn, research that guides learners in the lifelong journey of developing intercultural competence.

In the second of this two-volume special issue, other articles will explore further the interrelationships among practice, models, and theory in the context of the cultural turn in language teaching/learning.

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LIST OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Claudia Borghetti

Integrating Intercultural and Communicative Objectives in the Foreign Language Class. A proposal for the integration of two models

Melina Porto

A model for describing, analyzing and investigating cultural understanding in EFL reading settings

María del Carmen Méndez García

The intercultural turn brought about by the implementation of CLIL programmes in Spanish monolingual areas: a case study of intercultural competence in Andalusian Primary and Secondary schools

Linda Hui Yang and Mike Fleming

An Empirical Investigation of How Chinese College Students Make Sense of Foreign Films and TV series: Implications for the Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in ELT

Cristina Ros i Solé,

The Cosmopolitan language learner: perspectives from Lesser Taught Languages

Stephanie Houghton

Competing values and multiple selves: Making identity-development visible for assessment purposes in foreign language education

Gillian Peiser and Marion Jones

The significance of Intercultural Understanding (IU) in the English Modern Foreign Languages curriculum: a pupil perspective

Karin Zotzmann and Gregorio Hernández Zamora

The Politics of Recognition versus the Politics of Redistribution: Intercultural Education after the ‘Cultural Turn’